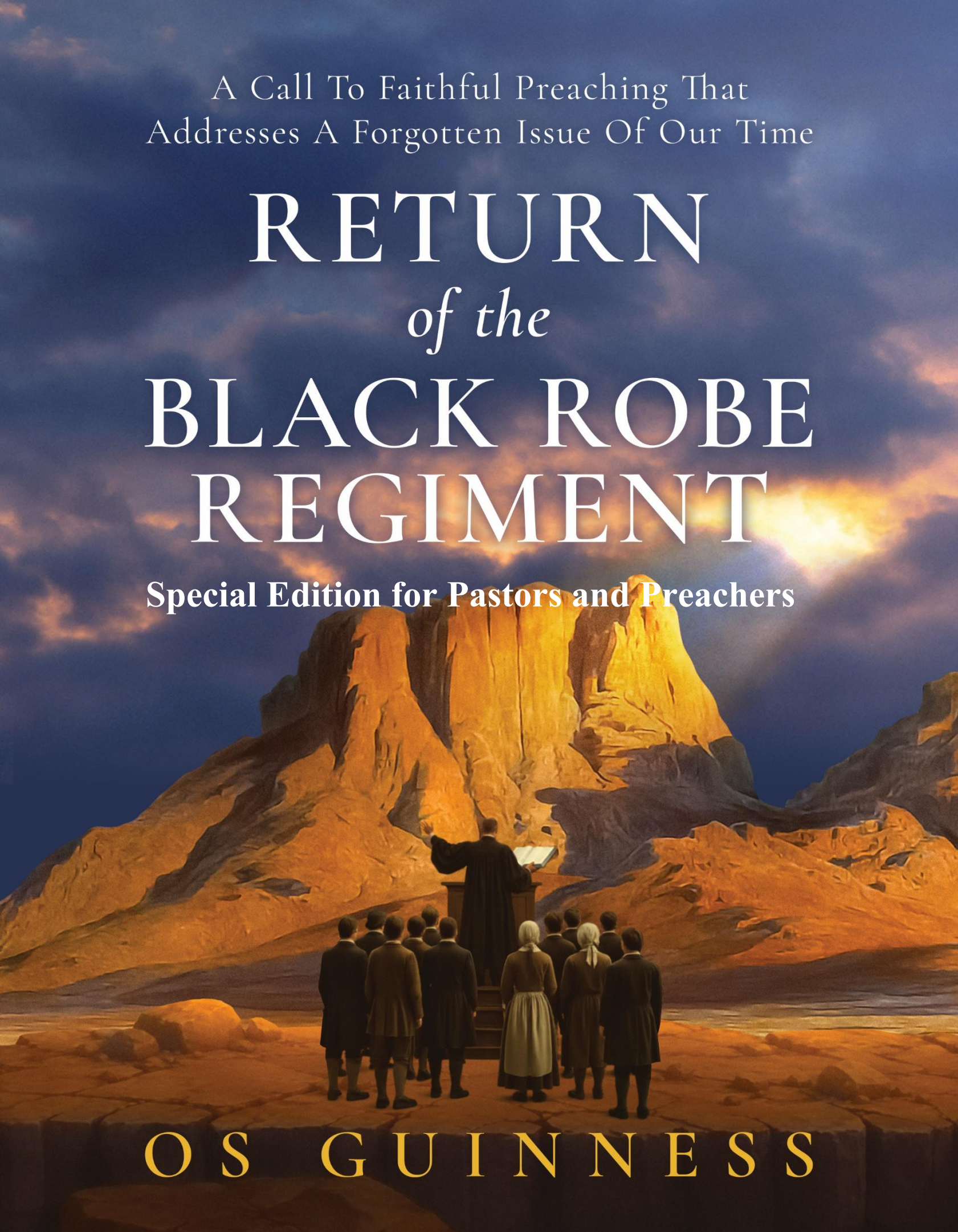


A Call To Faithful Preaching That
Addresses A Forgotten Issue Of Our Time

RETURN *of the* BLACK ROBE REGIMENT

Special Edition for Pastors and Preachers



OS GUINNESS

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Christian pastors and preachers, this brief essay is written for you. It is not for Christians who have callings in other spheres of life and have little or no daily responsibility for the health of the Christian churches. Nor is it for citizens of other faiths. As pastors and preachers, you have the peerless privilege of standing between God and God's people when you bring the Word of God to the people of God. Which is why this essay is written expressly for you. The present moment is shimmering with the immensity of the significance of the hour, and your special part is one of the most important responses needed.

Your predecessors leading up to the American Revolution were so decisive and courageous in their preaching that they were called the "Black Robe Regiment." Their stand for freedom is a highlight in the stirring story of the Christian faith. Black robes in the pulpit have given way to Hawaiian shirts, T-shirts, and other sartorial expressions today, but the deeper point stands. Preachers of the Word have an unrivalled calling. Heirs of both the Great Awakening and the earlier Puritan revolution, pastors and preachers in the revolutionary era taught their people, they inspired resistance, they justified independence, they allowed the Bible to thunder out its message, and many of them also took up arms. Names such as Boston's Congregationalist Jonathan Mayhew, who was read by the young Thomas Jefferson, Princeton's Presbyterian John Witherspoon, the "teacher of the revolution," and Virginia's Lutheran Peter Muhlenberg, who preached with armour under his clerical robes and became a Brigadier General in the Continental Army, such names will shine forever while the story of the American revolution is still told.

Have you ever pondered the remarkable fact that in the era leading up to the Revolution, the most cited books in America were not Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, or Baron Montesquieu, but Exodus and Deuteronomy? Great biblical truths were primary. Today, in contrast, at the very time when the American Republic and its freedoms are being attacked and threatened with denigration and demolition from one side or another, biblical truths are considered secondary at best and many otherwise faithful pastors and lay leaders are missing in action. Torn between the extremes of an overly privatized faith and an overly politicized faith, many pastors

are silent and many of their people with them – a calamitous and historic failure of both discipleship and citizenship, and at such a time.

But let me be clear. This brief essay is not in itself a call to political activism or action. It is about preaching. Proper political action is crucial in a republic like the American republic, but I leave that responsibility to you. The politicization of life, which regards politics as upstream from the rest of life, and turns everything into a political issue, is a curse. It is the legacy of the infamous Jean Jacques Rousseau and two centuries of the radical left. This essay is not about your citizenship as Americans. It is about your calling as preachers. It is a plea for a return to faithful biblical preaching and proper political action. In particular, it is a plea for what is needed to empower them both: preaching that expounds a vital but often forgotten theme in the Bible: -- the story of the founding of God's nation, Israel, the formative influence of covenant politics for all time, and in particular its decisive contribution to the founding of the American Republic and to our politics today. Those great biblical themes, demonstrated first in Exodus and Deuteronomy, hold enduring lessons not only for the American Republic, but for freedom-loving people and free societies everywhere. People of faith, people of the good news, are needed in political life as much as anywhere – not least to guarantee and safeguard the important principle that *under God, the first thing to say about politics is that politics is not the first thing, and it must never be.*

Is there a counter?

There is no question that I feel this issue passionately. Since I came to faith more than six decades ago, I have benefitted from some of the greatest preachers of the last hundred years. But more importantly for this argument, the spur for this essay comes from life and history. I have often told the story of a day in January 1949, when my dad said to me, “Son, we are in trouble. Chiang Kai Shek has just abandoned the city and left us at the mercy of the Red Army.” I was seven years old at the time, and we were living in Nanking (Nanjing today), which was then the capital of American-backed “free China.” For the next two years, we experienced the full reign of terror at the climax of Mao Zedong’s communist revolution – military repression, terror, show trials, persecution, and mass executions. It was the beginning of what was later to come to a crescendo in the cultural revolution and Mao’s Aztec-like pyramid of sacrifice – the horrific slaughter of perhaps fifty to seventy-five million of his fellow-Chinese, as he attempted to bend China to his will and impose the utopian social designs of his own devising.

Years later, when I was at Oxford University, I had dinner with my tutor at All Souls' College and I met Sir Isaiah Berlin, the great Jewish philosopher and advocate for freedom. It turned out that he had been a seven-year-old boy in the Russian revolution of 1917 as I had been a seven-year-old boy in the Chinese revolution of 1949. We compared memories of the two great revolutions of the twentieth century. "Thank God," he said, though he was not known as a Jew who believed in God, "Thank God for the English-speaking people and their stand against totalitarianism." I tremble to think what Sir Isaiah would have thought of the state of the United States and the English-speaking world today, with the ancient hatred of antisemitism rising around the world, not least in America, and with the anti-Western and anti-American forces of radical Marxism and radical Islamism no longer at the gates, but well ensconced and advancing within the walls.

"Do you want a name for my world?" Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in his last recorded words at the end of the nineteenth century, "This world is the will to power and nothing besides." The great iconoclast's "revaluation of all values" has gone on apace, reinforced by social Darwinism and postmodernism. Truth is dead, power is king, only the fittest survive and deserve to. The weak gods of reason and tolerance have given way to the strong gods of Chancellor Bismarck's "blood and iron." Perspectives are shifting from the West to Eurasia, the world's largest landmass, with its long history of authoritarianisms, such as Genghis Khan. Today, Eurasia is ruled by the tyrannies of Vladimir Putin in the west, Xi Jinping in the east, Kim Jong Un in the north-east, and the Iranian Ayatollahs in the south-west. As the twentieth century showed within the West, nations with military backgrounds, such as Germany, became vulnerable to harsh totalitarianism, whereas nations with more liberal backgrounds, such as Britain and America, have showed signs of soft or creeping authoritarianism. Could an alliance of totalitarianism and Artificial Intelligence lead one day to a human future that fuses the age-old inhuman with the brand-new posthuman?

The question for us as Christians is challenging. Do Christian churches and their teaching represent a strong counter to this global idolatry of unbounded power? Are we catalysts and pilot projects of free communities that can take their stand as principled alternatives to authoritarianism and totalitarianism? Democracy by itself will be no answer, as Plato, Aristotle, and the founders knew well, for democracies always degenerate into anarchy or mob rule. In addition, modernity has exposed an additional problem with democracy. The will of the people is said to be decisive,

but elites have their way of deciding what they think the will of the people is, or should be, and then enforcing it – their own will exerted as elites, with the battering ram of the supposed majority behind them. Adolf Hitler, we should never forget, was voted in by a majority. One ancient law of power still holds: Unless there is vigilance, *the greater the number of people to be ruled, the less the number of rulers who will rule*. Strong men and dictators arrive as the answer to chaos, and they do not rule by consent or by committee. Maximilien Robespierre, leader of the Jacobins in the French revolution, put the point bluntly at the height of the reign of terror in 1793, “One single will is necessary.” The logic, the appeal, and style of the future antichrist are afoot in our times.

The only sure counter to the menace of modern power lies in the Bible’s vision of human dignity, liberty, justice, and power – and limits to power. This counter can be observed in the story of the founding of God’s nation and its reflection, however imperfect, in the founding principles of the great experiment in freedom that was the American Republic, including its limits to power. But who today is setting out the Bible’s vision as the Black Robe Regiment did, with all the Bible’s lessons about freedom, justice, and power, both positive and negative? Where are the Christian pastors and preachers known for their wrestling with these mighty themes of the Bible? Who dares to speak not only to their local congregations, but with a prophetic substance and style that makes sense to audiences outside the church (and that cannot easily be distorted), and that bears in mind the different political situations facing fellow-Christians across the world? And last but far from least, who today will reach out and join forces with our friends, the Jewish people? The Jews, after all, were the first recipients of these great truths. They were also the channel through which the truths that shaped the American experiment were rediscovered in the seventeenth century, and they are our natural allies today as we join them as adherents of the only two faiths that share a common sacred text: their Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament.

To forge a strong Jewish-Christian alliance on behalf of a Hebrew Christian awakening of the American Republic and of freedom would serve three major objectives. First, it would be the best, surest, and only way to revitalize the American experiment. Second, it would mount a strong counter to the appalling waves of antisemitism the Jewish people now face in America and around the world. Antisemitism is not only evil, but in the light of all we owe to the Jews, it is self-destructive and profoundly stupid. Third, Christians and Jews can stand united on behalf of a human friendly future, with a vision of free societies committed to a high view of the sanctity of

life, the non-negotiable dignity of the human person made in the image and likeness of God, the equal dignity of all people of whatever country, culture, colour, or class, and strong clear notions of freedom, justice, the rule of law, and peace. Nothing less than such a vision and such a safeguard is at stake in our world now – and at stake in the calling of faithful pastors and preachers of the Word.

Why the silence?

The pastor's calling is not easy today. I readily acknowledge that fact. The status of pastors in America was once high. Generally admired, with a strong social standing in most communities, they were often the intellectuals of the community, and they were listened to with few alternative voices. The average Puritan it is said, listened to something like forty thousand hours of sermons, with few other distractions. Respect for the pastor was natural then, but pastors face a different world now. With a lowered social standing in many communities, with countless rival voices, and with impossible expectations of being the inspiring leader, eloquent preacher, all-wise counsellor, and super-successful chief executive all in one, the role of the modern pastor is unenviable. Seduced by the dancing will o' the wisp of relevance, many pastors and whole churches and denominations have chased the spirit of the age, and in the process ignored Dean Inge's warning and condemned themselves to be widowers. Like the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, whole churches and whole denominations, led by the indomitable folly of the US Episcopal Church and the Church of England, have acculturated themselves into oblivion. They have lost both the plot and the agenda as well as the faith, and now they are little earthly or heavenly use to anyone except their own dwindling and ageing members.

Little wonder that the stark fate of the so-called "sidelining of the mainline" has brought more conservative pastors and churches up short. Fearful of being lured by siren sounds and acculturated into oblivion, and desiring to be faithful at all costs, they have studiously avoided entanglement with the world and especially with "the dirty business of politics." The result for many pastors and churches is a faith that is *overly privatized*. Their faith and their churchmanship have become "privately engaging but publicly irrelevant." The central and all-decisive principle of the lordship of Jesus in every sphere of Christians' lives has been shrunk to the size of a weekend hobby and a social pastime for the pastor and his people.

As usual, however, one extreme reinforces another. Rightly concerned by the irrelevance of the overly privatized extreme, other pastors and churches have determinedly plunged into politics, aiming to make a difference, to make up for lost time, and to compensate for the inadequacies of their fellow-believers. Often lacking a clearly thought-through Christian view of what they are doing, they plunge into politics in the same way that others do, distinguished mostly by the added ardour of their faith. The result has become another extreme: an *overly politicized faith*. Politics trumps faith, politicized Christians have become “useful idiots” for political leaders, parties, and causes of one kind or another, the Christian faith has become indistinguishable from political parties and policies. The result in the eyes of the wider public is that faith has been pronounced “politicized” and “toxic.” In short, the politicization of the Christian faith is yet another sign of the triumph of the radical left and the decline of true Christian cultural authority in American society.

One variation on the overly privatized extreme deserves a special mention. Several pastors have shared with me some version of the following. “I want to be faithful, not politicized, so I follow the example of the early Christians under the Roman empire. I keep my head down and I try to remain faithful.” What such pastors forget, however, is that the early Christians were truly under a dictatorship, and we are not. The early Christians had little room to move politically, and their faithful witness under such conditions was heroic. They began, in fact, with the most powerful weapon of all: prayer. They began, as Paul writes to Timothy, with prayer for all those in high authority (I Timothy 2:1-4) – hardly a formula for political disengagement. But unlike our brothers and sisters in Rome then or in China today, American churches and pastors do not live under a dictatorship. We live in a free republic whose founding was shaped by the Bible and by notions from the Hebrew republic rediscovered by the Reformation. We must certainly pray, but we can also and we must also do more than just pray.

One vital implication of the Bible’s political ordering was reciprocal responsibility. (“You shall love your neighbour as yourself,” and so on.) (Leviticus 19:18) There was mutual solidarity as well as self-interest, a “We” and not only an “I.” This vital sense of reciprocal responsibility led to the Jewish saying, “Every Jew is responsible for every Jew.” The American equivalent should be that every American citizen should have a responsibility for other American citizens, and for the health and wellbeing of the American Republic. If that is so, for example, the failure of millions

of Evangelicals who do not vote is a titanic scandal. Once again, their overly privatized disengagement demonstrates a dire deficiency of both Christian discipleship and American citizenship.

But that is jumping ahead. There are prior questions: What are the great biblical truths that we can learn from the politics of Sinai and that we can use to improve our politics today and help build free communities and societies under God? How was it that these great truths came to shape the founding of the American Republic? What might their recovery mean for the practical problems and crises we face 250 years later? And how are these biblical ideas different from other competing ideas widely touted today, such as the ideals of the Enlightenment or other more radical ideas, such as those of Democratic Socialism and both classical and cultural Marxism? What would the recovery of these biblical ideas mean at this stage of America's and the world's history?

The forgotten path to the present

Sadly, the significance of Sinai and the Bible's decisive influence on the founding of the American Republic, with their lessons for empowering free societies everywhere, have become a forgotten story for most Americans and for many Christians. Even such magnificent initiatives as the Home School movement and the Classical Schools movement have favoured the Greek and Roman classics to the point of ignoring the far greater importance of the Bible. To be sure, the complete story of the Bible's contribution might well require a lifetime of reading and reflection. The urgency of our daily lives, not to speak of the present state of the world, is too pressing for that. But fortunately, the main contours of the story and the issues can be grasped more easily than that. Let's begin by thinking of America's story in terms of three significant "pairs."

First, the American Republic must be understood as the successful outcome of a double founding. The principal focus of the 250th anniversary of the Revolution is on July 4, 1776, and the Declaration of Independence and all that led up to it – and rightly so. But as Alexis de Tocqueville, the greatest foreign commentator on America pointed out, America can only be understood well if another founding is taken equally seriously. There were the official founders in the eighteenth century, of course, but behind them was the "New England civilization" of the Puritans and their central emphasis on covenant as the basis of their communities. The Mayflower Compact was a covenant. John Winthrop's sermon on the Arbella was all about covenant. John Adams described his draft of the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts as a

covenant. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, hardly the most devout of the founders, both proposed that the Great Seal of the United States should be images from the book of Exodus of Israel crossing the Red Sea. The Bible is the obvious source of these covenantal themes in America's first founding. The themes are rich, wide-ranging, and undeniable, but how they entered the discussion and what they have meant practically to America is often overlooked. Pastors must never again talk of the founding of America without doing justice to the first Puritan and covenantal founding, and the one closest to their own calling as preachers.

Second, the American Republic must be understood in terms of two distinct ancestries. The more widely cited ancestry of the American Republic and its notions of freedom go back to the common law tradition. Understood this way, modern freedom is the fruit of a tradition stretching back to the classical world of Athens and Rome, but gathering momentum with medieval notions of feudal contract, the rule of law, natural rights, and demands such as "no taxation without representation." This tradition climaxed in the English-speaking world in the historic Magna Carta at Runnymede in AD 1215. This tradition is fundamental, and it is still strongly recognized today, especially in the Roman Catholic account of Western freedom. But what is surprising, once again, is that the second and even more powerful ancestry is often overlooked, or at best minimized – the Reformation's rediscovery of "the Hebrew Republic," God's way of founding his own nation as demonstrated in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

To appreciate the impact of the Reformation and the rediscovery of the Hebrew Republic, it is important to see the contrast with the earlier political record of the Church. Put simply, when the Emperor Theodosius made Rome the official religion of the empire, in AD 380, the Christian faith had moved from persecuted to promoted. It was then natural for the Church to go forward with structures that reflected the ideas of Athens and the political structures of Rome. Ever since Caesar Augustus, the Roman Empire had had its Caesars, its consuls, and its senators, and the Church similarly came to have its popes, its cardinals, and its bishops. In other words, the political structures of the Church were like the political structures of the Empire, and both were hierarchical. That is why Thomas Hobbes described the Roman Catholic Church as the ghost of the Roman Empire sitting on the grave of the Empire. Both Rome and the Church were based on hierarchy, power, and ranking. Lord Acton's famous remark that "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," came in a letter to an Anglican bishop and he was referring to the Catholic

Church. Acton himself was a devout Roman Catholic, though he was a sterling champion of freedom and an opponent of unlimited power (and therefore of papal infallibility).

The problem with hierarchical power is obvious. It is all about power, who has it, and who has more of it. Power oppresses the weak, power corrupts the powerful, and power creates an elitism based on a monopoly rooted in the principle that “knowledge is power.” Hence the horrific papal notion that “Error has no rights,” issuing in the Inquisition, the Church’s tortures, and the burnings at the stake. Hence the thousand-year restriction of the Bible to the Latin Vulgate and the absolute monopoly of the Vulgate in the hands of priests and scholars. The year 2026 is not only the 250th anniversary of the American Revolution. It is also the 500th anniversary of the William Tyndale’s groundbreaking translation of the New Testament from the original Greek into English. Tyndale knew well that his life was at stake in what he was doing translating the Bible into English. He was breaking the monopoly, defying the embargo, and challenging the absolute power of the Pope, the Church, and the clergy. Politically speaking, he was breaking open the repressive monopoly of the Church’s confinement of the Bible to its elite. Even as Tyndale worked on his translation in Germany, he received news of a man who was burnt at the stake in Scotland, as Tyndale himself would be later -- simply for the crime of possessing a piece of paper with the Lord’s Prayer written in English.

Without Tyndale, it is said, there would have been no Shakespeare, for Tyndale’s vivid translation broke the dominance of Latin and French in England and led to a golden age of the English language – including William Shakespeare, John Bunyan, and John Milton. But far more importantly, without Tyndale (and earlier John Wycliffe) and the translation of the Bible, there would have been no English Reformation, no rediscovery of the Bible and its truths, and no explosive impetus of the passion for freedom that inspired both the English revolution in 1642 and the American revolution in 1776. If the oppressions of the medieval Church were derived from Rome’s hierarchical structures, as the Reformers claimed, was the Church’s traditional hierarchical power structures true to the politics of the Bible? Far from it, the Reformers said, in pursuit of their principle of “sola Scriptura.” *Politics in the Bible was not hierarchical, and all about power. It was covenantal, and all about relationships.*

The difference is titanic. Start with power, as the Greeks, the Romans, and the post-moderns all do, and you will be confined to choosing between different categories of government, and who

has the power in each one. Politics in this understanding is all about power, and only power. Is power in the hands of one man, as in a monarchy? An elite, as in an aristocracy? Or the people, as in a democracy? But start as the Bible starts, and you are given a completely different understanding, a different story, and a different set of priorities. The Bible starts with God who is a person, and with human persons who are made in his image and likeness, so life is essentially relational. From birth in a family on, relationships are everything in life. The two greatest commandments are relational. Covenants, as mutual agreements between people, are relational. Power is certainly a factor in the Bible, but the Bible is far more realistic about power than the Greeks, the Romans, and the post-moderns, so power in the Bible is always and essentially limited, both ethically and institutionally. Power has to be limited if relationships are to be just. Covenant, then, was the political theme picked up and explored by Calvin in Geneva, Zwingli and Bullinger in Zürich, John Knox in Scotland, Oliver Cromwell in England, and many others -- including, of course, the Puritans who settled in New England.

Third, for the Christian, the story of the Bible's understanding of politics and political life will always be our first, last, and final authority in political thinking, as in all our thinking, but it is helpful to explore the Bible's teaching and always to bear in mind two lesser perspectives. One is the Bible's contribution to the American founding and the other is the Bible's comparison and contrast with other classical and modern ideas of politics and freedom. The reason for adding this third pair is simple. We should never read the Bible as a political manifesto, any more than we should treat it as a science textbook or a business manual, but too many Christians read the Bible only as a spiritual and devotional handbook. In doing so, they miss the rich significance of the Bible for the full range of everyday secular life, including politics. *We must always read the Bible attentively as God's Book for Humanity, we must read it with all the thrusting questions of the day in mind, and we must always read it with a clear view of its contrast with ideas and claims of other faiths and philosophies.* Socrates was famous for his saying that "The unexamined life is not worth living," but in essence the Jews have added an essential follow-up that is vital for a relational world: "The uninstructed life is not worth living."

Read the Bible like that and it will at once become stunningly clear that the good news of the Bible begins with our redemption and an invitation to a relationship with God that is beyond compare, but there is more, infinitely more. The Bible broadens out into a view of the whole of

life lived by faith, under God. It offers nothing less than a vision of a good life and a good society that fires the heart, excites the mind, and launches our individual lives to be lived as the greatest adventure of which we are capable. If I may offer my personal testimony, having read through the Bible for more than sixty years, I have never known a year when the Bible did not speak to me freshly and powerfully, throwing light on new issues and new areas of life that I had never seen before in all my earlier readings.

Allow me, within the confines of this brief essay, to sketch a brief introduction to the Bible's covenant politics of freedom and responsibility, and then to suggest some further reading. The pay-off for readers who explore the issues in the Bible with the help of the sort of books mentioned will be, first, the undoubted excitement you will discover in exploring these themes; and second, the equal excitement of your people's response as you expound to them the rich significance of the Scriptures for our time. The exploration and its fruits will be yours, but speaking from my own experience, I am grateful to God for two major blessings in my life and my thinking since I was introduced to the Bible's view of covenant, and in particular the covenant politics of freedom and responsibility. Covenant politics has given me a profoundly deepened sense of awe at the depth and wonder of God's Word, and a genuine excitement at the burning relevance of biblical answers to the very real problems of the American Republic at the milestone of its 250th anniversary. Allow me some brief thoughts.

The bookends of history

Like many of the great issues facing humanity, the Bible's view of politics is given its earliest setting in the story of the creation and pre-history of humanity in the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. In a burst of majestic energy, God speaks the vastness and mystery of the universe into being. Repeatedly, God pronounces his creation good, and he declares that its crowning glory is a life form unique for being made in his own image and likeness: human beings. Endowed with a measure of their Creator's own freedom and creativity, humans are given the task of stewarding the fruitfulness of the planet on which they live. But they abuse their freedom, and from then on, one central consequence of their first transgression becomes a leading feature of all their subsequent societies and politics. Freedom becomes the source of the greatest human glory and the greatest human tragedy.

Politically speaking, the result of the chronic misuse of freedom is that humans veer between two extremes that become the bookends of history. Pursuing their own ways of freedom, which are always unstable, they drive either towards *freedom without order, which leads to anarchy*, or towards *order without freedom, which leads to authoritarianism*. Anarchy and authoritarianism are the twin bookends of human history. In Genesis itself, the one extreme of anarchy is represented by “the world filled with violence” before the flood (Genesis 6:13) and the other extreme of authoritarianism is represented by the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11) and later by the Egypt of the Pharaohs. The parallels in the modern world are only too plain, with failed and failing states on one side and despotic tyrannies and totalitarianism on the other.

All politics and political thinking take place between these bookends. Ordered freedom is the Holy Grail of human politics, and lasting freedom is its elusive will o’ the wisp. The aims and achievements of the American experiment can be assessed by these standards, for a start. Is the original ordered freedom of the American Republic in any later generation veering towards freedom without order, as in the 1960s? Or is it veering towards order without freedom, as many people fear today? The profundity of the Bible is the way it speaks to this dilemma with realism, with practical wisdom, and with hope.

The singularity of Sinai

The principle that contrast is the mother of clarity comes to the fore when the question of authority arises in politics. The Bible’s covenantal politics of freedom and responsibility must always be explored in clear contrast, first, with other faiths and religions in the overall family of the world’s faiths; and second, with different political and ideological philosophies. It is often said, for example, that Western politics owes everything to three cities: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem. Their claimed significance for politics is usually ranked in the same order, with Athens and its pioneering democracy hailed as No 1.

That is a serious misunderstanding of Western civilization. The West does indeed owe a great deal to Athens, Rome, and its classical roots, but its first great debt is not to any city, but to a desert— to what happened at the burning bush and the smoking mountain, at Mt Sinai. (And its second great debt is to what happened, not inside a city but outside, on a hill called Golgotha, the Place of the Skull). It is true that across the West, Politics 101 routinely starts with Athens, with the Greeks and their three-fold categories of government – *monarchy*, the rule of one; *aristocracy*,

the rule of the excellent few; and *democracy*, the rule of the people. As Plato, Aristotle, and Polybius explored the issue, each type of government had an ideal view, and each type degenerated in time, with monarchy degenerating into tyranny, aristocracy into oligarchy, and democracy into anarchy and mob rule. For many people today, that understanding of politics is the beginning, the middle, and the end of serious political discussion.

The Bible's view of politics begins differently. The founding of God's nation in the Book of Exodus begins at the time when Abraham's family has grown to a federation of tribes, and then a nation. The Bible starts with human beings, with people, with families, with their relationships, with people's character, words, dealings, promises, and conversations in society. The Bible's politics therefore focus on covenants, covenantal thinking, and covenantal societies, all of which are a matter of agreements between people. It comes from a different and more relational way of way of looking at politics than the Greeks. Whereas the Greeks categorized politics according to governments, and who has the say over power, another type of political analysis categorizes societies according to what comprises and determines them as societies with their different orderings of relationships. According to this view, whole societies, and not just governments, are what matter. At once a different understanding and different priorities begin to emerge. If society, viewed as a whole, determines the good life and the good society, then it is a mistake to focus on either politics alone, government alone, or power alone. When society and relationships are seen as primary, then the essential institutions of society (the family, the church or synagogue, and the school) can be seen for what they – "the golden matrix of life and the good life." Then too, politics can be given its proper place. Politics should be downstream from the central and primary institutions of society, and not the other way around.

Seen from this perspective, analysing what makes good societies rather than how governments are run, there are three types of society to put alongside the Greek categories of government: *hierarchical societies*, which once again are based on power and ranking (for example, a kingdom such as that of Louis XIV or George III, or an empire, such as the Egyptian, the Babylonian, the Persian, the Hellenistic, and the Roman); *organic societies*, which are linked by blood and kinship (for example, an African tribe or a Scottish clan;) and *covenantal societies*, based on a common binding agreement between the people (supremely, Israel and the United States, the Hebrew Republic and the American Republic).

Put simply, the covenant politics of the Bible is the expression of the truth that, for humans made in the image of God, relationships are foundational to the good life and the good society, and that covenants and their requirements are the best way to empower as well as safeguard the freedom and responsibility that make for good human relationships. In other words, the covenant promise that is clearly understood in a marriage is fired by the same logic as the covenant promise that forges a nation.

Covenants and covenantal thinking and living are a leading feature of the Bible in both the Hebrew and the Christian Scriptures. But of course, covenants were not unique to the Bible. There were covenantal societies outside the Bible, such as the ancient Hittite societies and the Celtic oath societies. There are also different types of covenants within the Bible, such as God's covenant with Noah, and with all humanity, and God's more personal covenant with Abraham and his family. But the Sinai covenant stands alone. It is unique in history for several reasons. First, God himself was a partner to the covenant. It is not an agreement "under God" or simply made in the presence of God, it is a covenant *with God*. Second, God made the agreement with all the people, not just with Moses and certain of the nation's leaders. And third, the covenant was an agreement that covered the whole of life, and not just some specified details, as in a legal contract.

But striking as these features are, none of these points are what makes the Sinai covenant truly unique. Its uniqueness stems above all from the uniqueness of its Author and primary partner. All covenants flourish or falter, succeed or collapse, according to one standard, and one alone: the character, trustworthiness, and reliability of the covenant partners, the covenant makers who swear to the agreement and the covenant keepers who sustain the promise that forms the covenant. The Sinai covenant was not made by Zeus, Apollo, Athena, or any of the pre-Christian and pagan gods. It was not made by Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna, Buddha, or any of the millions of gods in the East. It was not made by Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, or any of the godless self-gods of the modern West. Politics in the Bible begins with the covenant that begins with the absolute and unrivalled uniqueness of the God of Sinai.

The Sinai covenant was decisive because God who revealed himself at Sinai, at the burning bush and the smoking mountain, is unique. "I am who I am," or "I will be who I will be." (Exodus 3:14) Following those simple but awesome words, the majesty and uniqueness of the Lord shone out in the words that the Hebrews used to speak of God, and the reverence they showed.

Significantly, they chiefly used two different words to speak of God. One word, *elokim*, spoke of God as the supreme Power, understood as the author of Nature and the sum total of all the forces of creation, and therefore the single Will responsible for all that we know of the universe, the sun the moon, and the stars, the Big Bang and all the mysteries of science.

The word “God,” when understood and used in this way, was the word Israel could use with those who believed in other gods. For example, Joseph used the word *elokim* in talking to Potiphar’s wife, (“How then could I do such a wicked thing and sin against god?” (Exodus 30:9) Joseph used the same word in talking to Pharaoh too. But when the text described God’s special presence with Joseph in his earlier trials, it used the other and more special word. Thus, *Elokim* was the lesser of the two words. It was a noun that could be used of God as power, and it could be used in talking to followers of other religions. The pagan understanding of their gods rose no higher than seeing them as the personification of forces in the universe or perhaps as the very universe itself, but no more.

The second word used by the Hebrews spoke of a transcendent reality that leaves human minds dazed, words rendered mute, and categories shattered. The second word the Hebrews used was quite different, and it was used quite differently. *Elokim* was a noun, but *Hashem* was a name. In fact, *Hashem* means “The Name,” the name of One so revered, so utterly beyond, so awesome in transcendence that even his revealed name could not be uttered out loud. To pronounce the revealed Name out loud was itself irreverence. *Hashem*, “the Name,” was therefore once removed, but unlike *elokim*, *Hashem* spoke of a Person, not simply a Power. *Hashem* was a name and not a noun, and the real name was revered as so awesome that it could only be spoken aloud once a year, and then only by the High Priest, and only in the Holy of Holies. *Hashem*, not *elokim* was the term used of the Lord’s presence with Joseph earlier in his story. (“*Hashem* was with Joseph...*Hashem* gave him success in everything he did.” Exodus 39:2,5)

When Moses spoke to Pharaoh, he used the word *elokim*. Referring to God as the power behind all power was fully intelligible to Pharaoh with his pantheon of gods, but when Moses used the word *Hashem* to Pharaoh, it made no sense to the ruler of Egypt. “Who is *Hashem* that I should obey Him and let Israel go?” Pharaoh said. “I do not know *Hashem* and I will not let Israel go.” (Exodus 5:2)

Many Christians use the name of God far too lightly and routinely today., including the way they pray. God-this, God-that, God-the other, they pray, with little sense of awestruck reverence. The mind-shattering, language-silencing uniqueness of the transcendent sovereign God of the Bible changes everything. He who is “One,” “Only,” “Other” and “Over All” enters human thinking and life and speaks from Mt Sinai as the ultimate authority for life, for thought, for everything. He is a Person, the supreme Person, and not simply a Power or the sum of all powers. He has a name, a name to be revered. God is not simply a noun to be used at will, an abstract term to be bandied around in a philosophy seminar, an oath to be uttered as a formula, let alone a swear word in the lexicon of the locker room. For Jews and for Christians, “under God” speaks of an awareness and an accountability that can never be other than first, first, first, and unquestionably decisive.

In his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Josephus described Abraham as a “man of great sagacity” who was “determined to change completely the views which all then had about God.” To which Paul Johnson comments in his *A History of the Jews*, “One way of summing up 4,000 years of Jewish history is to ask what would have happened to the human race if Abraham...had stayed in Ur and kept his higher notions to himself...Certainly the world would have been a radically different place.” Indeed, and after Sinai and its burning bush and its smoking mountain, even more so. All other contenders from the different families of the world’s religions all fall back in disarray – the millions of impersonal gods of the East on one side and the countless godless self-gods of the secularist West on the other. There is no idol, no strong man, no despot, no tyrant, no dictator, no antichrist who can stand against the Lord God of Sinai. The Sinai covenant and all other covenants then made with God or under God have a guarantee beyond all guarantees and assurances: the character and faithfulness of the God of Sinai who has given his word.

So much more

The confines of this short essay preclude a full discussion of the rich blessings of the Bible’s understanding of covenants and human life. But I guarantee a rich reward for anyone who makes the commitment to explore this notion and its significance in both history and today. John Adams, America’s second president, when writing to Thomas Jefferson, America’s third, made a wonderful, though modest, claim. “I have examined all religions, as well as my narrow sphere, my

straightened means, and my busy life would allow: and the result is that the Bible is the best Book in the world. It contains more philosophy than all the libraries I have seen.”

After a lifetime graced by faith, and with similar caveats about my own “narrow sphere and straitened means,” I would say the same thing as Adams in area after area, and most certainly in thinking about politics. But it was not always so for me in terms of politics. Like many Christians even today, I had been taught to think Christianly about politics beginning only with a combination of the Greeks and the New Testament. There was next to nothing of the Old Testament except perhaps an occasional reference to prophetic attacks on injustice. I knew of the notion of “covenant,” of course, but it had always been explained as a purely theological or spiritual truth, or as a notion that was important for marriage, not politics. Covenant had nothing to do with any politics that I had ever known. But everything changed for me the day when a friend introduced me to the writings of a Jewish scholar, Daniel J. Elazar, the dean of thinkers and writers who had opened a rich vein of thinking about covenant. The Sinai covenant was Israel’s constitution of liberty. It would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the world that has been illuminated for me since then.

My thinking has never been the same, and here are some of the briefest of hints to spur others.

First, Sinai’s covenant politics of freedom and responsibility shows how the great themes of the exodus have become the master narrative of Western and human freedom. In the light of their great truths, no bully, no tyrant, and no oppressor can ever sleep untroubled again. God and God’s people who love justice are ranged on behalf of against all injustice and oppression. “Let my people go!” has become the rallying cry of countless movements for freedom and justice down the centuries -- including the American Revolution, the movement for the Abolition of slavery, and the Civil Rights movement. Such are their great themes of freedom, justice, and power that the Books of Exodus and Deuteronomy should be studied as classics on a par with any political classics of the West. When their perspective is lengthened to include the later Hebrew prophets, they grow to heights of even greater significance. The Hebrew prophets reframed the exodus as the beginning of God’s great love story and his search for his people, and the entire narrative now beckons us as the best news ever for humanity.

Second, Sinai's covenant politics of freedom and responsibility is rich in principles, lessons, and practical realism that apply to all political thinking. What, for example, were some features of the impact of the Reformation's rediscovery of the Hebrew Republic and its influence on later political thinking? Three principles are prominent. One: Sinai politics begins with *freely chosen consent*, the origin of the Declaration's "consent of the governed." The Lord proposes the terms of the covenant, but it is only agreed when the people say three times, "All that the Lord says, we will do." (Exodus 19:8). Two: Sinai politics is matter of *a morally binding pledge*. Far more than a legal contract, the covenant depends on the character and word of the promise makers – the idea that though the Declaration of Independence becomes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's "promissory note." Three: Sinai politics means *the reciprocal responsibility of all for all*. The Israelites were to love their neighbours as themselves. The covenant was a matter of "All for One, and One for All," in the later words of the Three Musketeers. Unlike legal contracts, based on pure self-interest, covenants are about personal interest and collective solidarity. They are a matter of responsibilities as well as rights, and "We" and not only "I."

Third, Sinai's covenant politics of freedom and responsibility throws light and lends weight to many of the great themes of freedom discussed today. One clear example is the simple truth that there are always basic tasks or phases in establishing free societies, and without them freedom cannot be established. Again, three tasks are basic and essential. One: the opening task is always a matter of *winning or gaining freedom*. In the story of the exodus, freedom was won through the liberation from Egypt, and in America's story through the revolution and independence in 1776. Two: the next task is the *ordering of freedom*. In Israel's case, the ordering of freedom was achieved through the agreement to the Covenant and the Ten Commandments, and in America's case through the Constitution in 1787. Three: the often-forgotten final task is *sustaining freedom*. This task is always the hardest because so easily forgotten. Whereas the first two tasks are relatively fast, and often heroic and inspiring (such as the story of the Ten Plagues and the exploits of the Revolutionary War), the third is never finished. The result is the double danger of presumption: the presumption that the success has "all been up to us" and the presumption that the success will last forever.

Fourth, Sinai's covenant politics of freedom and responsibility provides the foundational wisdom that illuminates thinking from the American past that would otherwise look outdated and

irrelevant today. Take the notion of “the golden triangle of freedom.” That is my term for the founders’ almost universal insistence on the link between freedom and morality, which does not sit well with modern thinking. Far from being “old-fashioned,” “children of their times,” or “reactionaries,” the founders were in fact clear-eyed realists. Without morality, freedom cannot and will not last. They were addressing what is called the paradox of freedom: the apparent conundrum that the greatest enemy of freedom is freedom. Their answer was the golden triangle, which can be illustrated across all their writings. “*Freedom requires virtue*” (including character and such virtues as honesty and loyalty); “*virtue requires faith*” (of some sort); and “*faith (of any sort) requires freedom*” (and therefore the basic freedoms of conscience, speech, and association). Like the recycling triangle, the logic of the golden triangle goes on forever. Many contemporary Americans flatly reject or ignore each of the three legs of the triangle. Which means that if, indeed, the founders were right, modern notions of freedom are unstable and unrealistic. They simply will not last.

Fifth, Sinai’s covenant politics of freedom and responsibility offers answers to some of the deepest crises facing free societies today. Freedom, as President Reagan warned, is always one generation away from collapse. Which means simply that freedom requires transmission, and once again covenant politics is strong where we today are weak. The story of the Hebrew Passover is a dramatic example. After four centuries, the Israelites were going free the next day, but Moses never mentioned freedom. They were setting off to their Promised Land, the land of milk and honey and their dreams. Moses never mentioned the land. Instead, Moses talked three times about children. Why? Because the story we pass on to our children is the key to our identity and continuity. With appalling public education and with suicidally open borders, the crisis of the American Republic is at its direst at this point. It is still relatively easy, it is said, to become an American in terms of naturalization papers. But it is increasingly difficult for anyone to know what it is to *be American* in terms of principles. The transmission required for the Republic has broken down, and citizenship of the Republic has become an almost insoluble problem.

These few points are, as I said, only the barest hints of the rich, deep truths of Sinai’s covenant politics of freedom and responsibility. But it is my prayer that, with your own prayer, wrestling, and the help of some of the books mentioned at the end of this essay, pastors and preachers will be prompted to explore these great truths for themselves and to expound them to

their people as an essential part of “the whole counsel of God.” My prayer is that pastors and preachers will explore and expound these truths across the land. As they do so once again, may an equivalent of the “Black robe regiment” rise again with courage and power in our time. May these truths of God’s Word, like seeds lying in the ground waiting only for the refreshing rain of God’s Spirit, spring up to be a glorious harvest of faith, character, courage, freedom, justice – and the public engagement of countless citizens who are biblically informed. So may the outcome be such a massive return to the Author of all life and freedom that together we may see a mighty American homecoming in our time and the launch of a pioneering model for Christians all around the world. So may it be.

Select books for further reading

Daniel J. Elazar *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions*

Daniel J. Elazar *Covenant and Commonwealth: From Christian Separation Through the Protestant Reformation*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *Covenant & Conversation: Exodus, the Book of Redemption*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks *Covenant & Conversation: Deuteronomy, Renewal of the Sinai Covenant*

Leon R. Kass *Founding of God's Nation*

Meier Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver, Stuart W. Halpern *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land: The Hebrew Bible in the United States: A Sourcebook*

Daniel L. Dreisbach *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers*

Os Guinness *The Magna Carta of Humanity: Sinai's Revolutionary Faith and the Future of Freedom*

Os Guinness *A Freedom Like No Other: America 250 and the Restoration of the American Republic*

